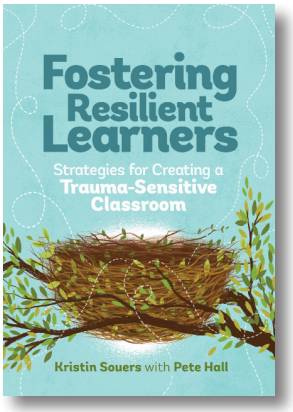
ASCD LEADERSHIP SUMMARIES for EDUCATORS

Fostering Resilient Learners

Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom



by **Kristin Souers with Pete Hall**

Contents

Part I: Trauma
Page 2

Part II: Self-Awareness
Page 3

Part III: Relationships
Page 4

Part IV: Belief
Page 5

Part V: Live, Laugh, Love
Page 6

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In ***Fostering Resilient Learners***, Kristin Souers and Pete Hall explore an urgent and growing issue—childhood trauma—and its profound effect on learning and teaching,

Grounded in research and their experience working with trauma-affected students and their teachers, Souers, a mental health therapist, and Hall, a veteran principal, advise educators on how to cultivate a trauma-sensitive learning environment for students across all content areas, grade levels, and educational settings.

Educators face the impact of trauma in the classroom every day. Souers and Hall will help guide you to seek solutions rather than dwell on problems, and build relationships that allow students to grow, thrive, and learn at high levels.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What trauma is and how it hinders learning, motivation, and success.
- Why it's important to stay connected to your personal mission.
- How to build strong relationships and create a safe learning space.
- How to adopt a strength-based approach to viewing destructive behavior.

Based on *Fostering Resilient Learners* by Kristin Souers with Pete Hall. Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 2 Christy Drive, Suite 302, Chadds Ford, PA 19317 USA.

PART I: Trauma

No one disagrees that students should be held to the highest standard of learning. Where conflict tends to occur is in how we tackle that goal. For many young people who have experienced trauma, success—academic or otherwise—seems out of reach. How do we support students who arrive at school affected by trauma and other not-OK experiences? How do we provide environments that are safe and predictable and motivational for learning? Before we answer these questions, it is important to acknowledge some fundamental truths:

1. Trauma is real.
2. Trauma is prevalent. In fact, it is likely much more common than we care to admit.
3. Trauma is toxic to the brain and can affect development and learning in a multitude of ways.
4. In our schools, we need to be prepared to support students who have experienced trauma, even if we don't know exactly who they are.
5. Children are resilient, and within positive learning environments they can grow, learn, and succeed.

Understanding Trauma and the Prevalence of the Not-OK

The struggles that affect people's happiness, relationships, and coping ability, not surprisingly, bleed into the school environment. As an educator, you don't need a peer-edited research article to validate what your gut and your experience have already told you is true: a student's life outside school matters. Students' complicated, stressful lives can create conditions that present massive obstacles to learning.

When schools first started integrating trauma awareness, educators and other professionals felt compelled to learn a student's "story" as a means of understanding his or her behavior. That approach often led to getting caught up in the trauma narrative rather than supporting and understanding the effect of that event on the young person.

It is much more helpful to monitor the effect of the event on each individual, and not be preoccupied with the details of the event itself. This shift in perspective prompts us to be more sensitive to that effect and thus be better at fostering healing and growth. Moreover, by altering our approach, we can begin to see students as more than their story.

Groundbreaking research led by Dr. Robert Anda and Dr. Vincent Feliti in the late 1990s explored the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their subsequent mental and physical health as adults. The more ACEs a student experiences, the more likely he or she experiences serious school and health issues. The initial eight ACEs that Felitti and colleagues studied were

- Substance abuse in the home.
- Parental separation or divorce.
- Mental illness in the home.
- Witnessing domestic violence.
- Suicidal household member.
- Death of a parent or another loved one.
- Parental incarceration.
- Experience of abuse (psychological, physical, or sexual) or neglect (emotional or physical).

Experiences that should now be added to that list include:

- Exposure to a natural disaster.
- Criminal behavior in the home.
- Terminal or chronic illness of a family member.
- Military deployment of a family member.
- War exposure.
- Homelessness.
- Victimization or bullying.

The ACE Study shows a remarkable link between not-OK childhood events and health issues later in life. What the original ACE research did not explore, however, was the immediate effect that these traumatic experiences had on children. This is crucial information that can inform educators' practice and the supports we offer to the young people under our care.

Trauma is toxic to the brain as well as to the body. When brains are triggered by threat or perception of threat, they release chemicals into the body to allow us to "survive" those states of stress. Because the infant and early childhood brain is so sensitive, chronically elevated levels of stress hormones can significantly disrupt the development of the brain in a multitude of ways, affecting learning, memory, mood, relational skills, and aspects of executive functioning—all required for success in a classroom setting.

We know that childhood trauma has become an epidemic. Children with mental health issues are not required to obtain professional mental health services, but they are legally obligated to attend school. Thus, school is the one place where we are guaranteed to access our trauma-affected children. Our students need us to create a trauma-sensitive learning environment for them.

The Manifestation of ACEs in the Classroom

With all the pressure we're under to push students toward mastery of grade-level standards, where does the trauma awareness piece fit in? We must first ensure that students are in a safe place.

When students are in a state of stress, they are in the part of their brain designed for survival: the limbic area. The limbic system controls arousal, emotion, and the flight, fight, and freeze response. Dr. Dan Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, refers to this area as the "downstairs brain." When students' downstairs brains are in charge, their capacity to learn and retain information is disrupted.

Our goal is to get them into the higher-functioning part of their brain—the prefrontal cortex—which enables them to think, reason, and maintain flexibility. Siegel calls this area the "upstairs brain." One of its primary purposes is to regulate the downstairs brain—in short, to keep the brain online and to shift into survival mode only when absolutely necessary.

To climb out of survival mode, it is helpful for students to be able to identify the feelings, name the function of their brain, and attune to their biology. This will give them the power to manage the intensity associated with the stress. (In this context, *intensity* refers to the body's stressed state in response to the threat.)

By teaching them about the differences between the upstairs and downstairs brains, we are empowering them to understand their biology and make healthy choices to manage it. The overall goal for us is to act with integrity, to be consistent and reliable, to remain logical and regulated in times of stress, and—when facing disruptive, defiant, and disrespectful behavior—to stay in our upstairs brain.

PART II: Self-Awareness

In a trauma-sensitive learning environment, the adult is necessarily in charge of the setting and the tone of the space. It is our demeanor, our approach, our behaviors, our volume, and our presence that affect how our young people live, breathe, and perform in the classroom. It starts with us. It starts with you.

Be true to you. The more self-aware we become, the easier it is for us to manage the needs of those in front of us. Begin to imagine and define what your true sense of self looks like. Think about which key aspects of yourself cannot, no matter what, be taken from you. What can you truly hold onto and rely on? The answers become your way of identifying your *cement shoes*.

Imagine that you're walking on the beach toward the ocean. When you are up to your ankles in the water and a wave hits, what happens? What about when you are up to your knees, waist, or chest? The farther you go out, the more likely you are to be toppled by the waves that crash upon you.

Now imagine that you have on a pair of cement shoes. If you were firmly grounded where you stood, you would be less likely to be toppled by the waves that hit you, no matter how big. Envision this as a way of staying true—to your ideals, integrity, vision, beliefs, and self—in your classroom or other professional setting.

Students and their families present to us a variety of stressors and levels of intensity that can throw us off balance. In your work with students and families, define your cement shoes and keep them on. If you do this, you will be less likely to be swayed from who you are and how you want to be, and you will be less likely to compromise yourself and your integrity in the process.

When we stay grounded in our truth, we will behave and interact in ways that make us feel proud, not remorseful.

When in Doubt...

Teaching students and ourselves to breathe deeply is key in helping us all access—and stay in—our upstairs brains. Deep breathing is particularly crucial before such tasks as eating, transitioning to a new topic, taking a test, or preparing for a change in the schedule.

Having students pay attention to the difference in their breathing when they are regulated (in their upstairs brain) and when they are dysregulated (in their downstairs brain) will help them become aware of how their bodies act differently in each of these states and how that affects their capacity to learn. Deep breathing can serve as a tremen-

dous resource in helping them maintain or, when needed, return to a regulated state.

To help you prepare for challenging moments, just think of saying, "When in doubt, shut your mouth and take a breath." That simple piece of advice is a "pause" button for our decision-making processes. Although there will still be times when we descend to our downstairs brain, the more we pause, the closer we get to creating and sustaining a safe environment to nurture our students' development.

Our overarching goal is to develop competent, capable adults who can contribute to society. However, that mission sometimes gets lost in the shuffle of our impatience, our protective nature, our fear, or our insistence that students do it *our* way.

When these factors interfere, we end up taking away students' power to do, learn, and grow for themselves.

Identify the methods and strategies that communicate to students that you have faith in their ability to learn, grow, endure, and succeed. How do you find the right fit for students? The good news is that this is not just on us, the adults. Students need to be active participants in relaying what is and isn't helpful.

The more we find ways to partner with them around this, the better. We can empower them to learn healthy ways to maneuver through the troubled waters themselves.

PART III: Relationships

The work we do is never in isolation. By design, schools are places where humans interact. Teachers, students, parents, administrators, counselors, and others are organized in such a fashion to support one another in reaching our mutual goals. The relationships we forge and maintain with others are essential to our collective and individual success.

No One Said Relationships Are Easy

We can be creative in adapting our relationships with students so that they all feel some connection with us. The first step is to think of ourselves as being "safe enough" and "healthy enough" for students—because for the most part, that is all our kids really need from us.

If they know we will be relentless in our support of their endeavors, forgive them the errors they make, and maintain our determination that they will live up to their potential and our expectations, then the relationships will follow.

For students who have experienced trauma, forging strong relationships is not simple. Because the source of many students' trauma is another human being, distrust and a hesitancy to bond with others are common. Rather than forcing the issue and attempting to create a connection that will "save" a particular student, it's more effective for us to concentrate on simply being safe enough and healthy enough for all students who enter our domain.

Trust is a fundamental part of a healthy relationship. A healthy relationship, in turn, is an instrumental aspect of feeling safe—and a sense of safety enables students who have experienced trauma to stay regulated and access the healthy parts of their brain. You can become that person they can rely on for support and empowerment.

Whether you work with students every day or just a short time each week, the consistency of your presence and influence provides the foundation for building a safe and sustainable relationship with every student in your care.

Above all, your relationships with students need to be authentic and sincere. Kids, particularly those who have experienced trauma, can see right through the façade of an insincere relationship.

Focus on the Person, Not the Label

The kids who enter our classrooms are ours—every single one of them. When we feel overwhelmed by a student's behavior, having a label or a diagnosis assures us that the behavior is a result of something innate or developmental that we cannot control. So, the behaviors, to this manner of thinking, aren't our fault.

Making students leave class and putting labels on them are both forms of dismissal that stem from our need for control. In both cases, we're allowing our own needs to trump our students' needs. We can do better.

A frequent trigger for teachers is the perceived lack of control. Can we control how students behave in school? When they're trying to stay regulated, often without helpful tools, their behavior is not under our control. However, we can influence the situation dramatically.

We can provide an environment that is safe and predictable. We can provide a caring, trusting relationship. We can help them remain focused on learning, despite the distractions. We cannot control everything, but we can influence quite a bit. And this is what trauma-affected students need from us.

Shifting our thinking to looking at events through the student's eyes takes courage and openness. Identify which elements of a situation you can and can't control and then center your energy on effecting positive change.

Doors and Windows

How many times have you felt stuck with a student, trapped in a situation where you believed that the only option was to assert your authority, leverage your power, or otherwise act in a way that didn't align with your personal mission statement? Perhaps you've issued an ultimatum: *This is the last time I'm going to ask. If you don't do X right now, I'm going to do Y.* The problem with this approach is that you've effectively painted yourself into a corner. It's as if you were locked in a cabin and you were fixated on the locked door as your sole means of escape. Had you stopped to assess all your options you would have noticed a window.

When we arrive at that place where all we see is the locked door, this means we are exhausted, emotionally drained, and done. This response is our body's way of letting us know that we need to slow down, take a breath, and step away for a moment. This is when we need to take a break and seek some repair and rejuvenation so that we can summon the energy to find the windows.

When you hit a wall (or a locked door), it's important to give yourself permission to step away and widen your peripheral vision so that you can see the windows. As you widen your peripheral vision, you can access the parts of your brain that are conducive to partnership and problem solving.

It is important to meet students where they are and to acknowledge their skills, habits, strengths, and needs. We have to believe that students are doing the best they can with what they have in the moment, and it is up to us to help them develop in areas where they have been deprived.

This requires us to be flexible in our teaching methods, discipline approaches, and interactions with individual students. This is not an easy task, but it is essential if we want our students to grow and develop in healthy ways.

PART IV: Belief

The way we interpret the events, people, and situations in our lives determines our reality.

Those who have experienced trauma are forever changed—not necessarily forever damaged. Many victims of trauma do feel damaged by their experiences. Some people never want to move past their trauma and feel a strong need to be validated for the hardships they have endured. Others don't want their trauma to be acknowledged at all and have worked their entire lives to ensure that it won't be. Each victim gets to choose whether to allow it to damage them forever.

Can we look at our students without seeing them as "forever damaged"? It can be challenging when we are familiar with a student's trauma history; when we are intimately aware of the abuse, neglect, or traumatic events that our students have suffered, it all becomes more real to us. How can we empower our students as well as ourselves to see their potential?

Many of us get hyper-focused on what happens during the 14 to 18 hours our students aren't with us. Sometimes we experience a sense of utter helplessness that threatens to destroy our motivation to keep going.

Instead, stop and think about the 6 to 10 hours you do have with those students. Focus on the things you can accomplish in those hours, because that is what you can control.

We have an incredible opportunity in this period to show students what they are capable of, to expose them to different ways of being, to teach them healthy ways of managing, and to empower them to learn and grow in productive ways. Can we focus on our students' strengths rather than their deficits? Can we view our students as overflowing with potential rather than doomed to failure? It's up to us.

Don't Let Fear Drive the Bus

With parents, fear is often the driving factor of their decisions. They admit that fear of something dangerous happening influences their decisions to allow or forbid their children to do certain things. Are we as parents letting fear drive our bus?

When fear drives, we go nowhere good. Without risk exposure, children are deprived of the opportunity to learn how to manage the intensity associated with risk and, as a result, may be set up for the possibility of even greater harm.

Sheltering children from risk and steering them away from possible stressors won't protect them in the end; at worse, our well-intentioned fear of the not-OK may ruin their childhood and sabotage their future. Instead of bubble-wrapping our children, we need to teach them the skills

to manage crises in a way that empowers them.

The same priority applies to educators. How much does fear influence our decisions, responses, beliefs, and interactions in the classroom?

When we see a student as a tornado waiting to happen rather than a child who needs guidance and instruction, we're letting fear drive our bus. The challenge is to shift our focus and set the table with positive expectations for every child in every situation. In other words, let facts, not fear, drive the bus.

PART V: Live, Laugh, Love

When we find ways to show our students grace, to model for them a sense of gratitude and acceptance, we empower them to do the same for themselves and others.

The Cookie Jar: The Art of Praise

We all have a strong innate need to be recognized and valued, and we often look to others to fulfill that need. We rely on external feedback to confirm that we did something well, that we're worthy of love, that our appearance is up to par, or that something we've done is valued. In short, we use external feedback, we'll call them "cookies," to help determine our sense of self-worth.

Students who have experienced trauma have a significantly compromised capacity to self-knowledge—that is, to recognize and validate themselves, their feelings, or their efforts. This is a result of their allocating resources toward managing their trauma-induced stress instead of toward healthy development.

They often learn early-on to "cue off their environment" to determine who they are and how they feel. Their sense of self is heavily influenced by the reactions of those around them. The more they are forced to cue off others, the less they learn to cue off themselves, moving them further away from their own inner selves and needs.

Our job is to cue off the students and families we work with and determine what their needs are. When we do this properly, our actions and decisions are based on what they show or tell us.

For some youngsters, compliments are overwhelming: being so foreign to anything they have heard before, praise can actually be a trigger. The praise doesn't fit into the construct of their self-image and feels out of place. When this happens, we need to ease our way more gradually into the praise process.

How can students give themselves cookies if they're unaware of how deserving they are? We can teach our youngsters this skill by identifying their strengths, their goals, and the work they need to do to meet those goals. We can name and celebrate students' emotions, efforts, and accomplishments.

Introduce the notion of self-acknowledgment to your students and incorporate regular practices that encourage them to give themselves a cookie. The payoff could be extraordinary.

Kristin Van Marter Souers, MA LMHC is also the lead author of *Relationship, Responsibility, and Regulation: Trauma-invested Practices for Fostering Resilient Learners* (ASCD, 2019). She provides critical professional development, consultation, education, and training services to schools, school districts, and organizations throughout the country. She has presented to thousands of audiences, facilitated group learning, supervised internships, directed programs, and has been an adjunct professor at Gonzaga University in their Masters in Counseling Program. *kristinsouers@gmail.com*

Pete Hall is a speaker, author, and international capacity-builder. A former teacher and veteran school principal, Pete has written over twenty articles on school leadership and eleven books, including *Chasing the Show* (Author's Press, 2020), *Pursuing Greatness* (McREL, 2019), and *Creating a Culture of Reflective Practice* (ASCD, 2018). *petehall@education.com.*